

Censorship

Congress told the Reagan administration last fall to hold up on ordering government workers to submit any personal material they wish to publish to prior censorship — a censorship that prevails even after these workers leave the federal service.

Concerned with First Amendment rights, Congress reviewed the presidential order and voted for delay. Congress wanted time to study the matter.

The administration, concerned with the possible loss of government secrets and breach of security, didn't want to wait that long. Instead it quickly instigated another form of censorship. It required that 2.5 million employees and 1.5 million government contractors sign non-disclosure agreements.

Now, if the government suspects an employee or a contractor is about to publish material it feels should remain unpublished, it can go to court, produce a signed non-disclosure agreement and obtain an injunction requiring pre-publication review. Even after an official or employee leaves the government, he can be prevented from telling his story without having it censored prior to publication. In this way the administration is undermining the intent of Congress.

This governmental concern with secrecy originated in the Central Intelligence Agency, which has had its employees sign non-disclosure agreements for decades.

The courts have backed this CIA requirement, and with good cause. The CIA has a legitimate need for covert operation. It could not perform its duties without secrecy.

Nevertheless, we feel what the Reagan administration is attempting is overkill. This massive effort to control the flow of information from 4 million persons makes it possible for this or any future administration to gag its best-informed critics on a pretense of protecting national security. It could deprive the people of knowledge that is essential to enlightened self-government. It could limit the kind of free public discussion of government policies essential to the survival of our democracy.

Some secrets must be cloaked for a certain period of time. But public officials should never be given the opportunity to protect themselves from criticism by censoring their critics.

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